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Returning to Eden

ABSTRACT

‘Be Indulgent. Have Everything,’ advertising Brookwater a new suburb in the Springfield area is a billboard I have a problem with. Landscapes matter: understanding past ways of using the landscape helps to throw a broader light on this problem. I took a few journeys and ended at the site of Eden homestead—the place that once took in all of the Springfield area. I encourage others to journey into their backyard, because the things I found were much closer to the thesis I am trying to write than I expected.

BIOGRAPHY

Luke is a PhD candidate in history working on the Queensland Historical Atlas Project at the University of Queensland. His thesis is tentatively titled ‘The storied landscape.’

RETURNING TO EDEN

‘Be Indulgent. Have Everything,’ the billboard reads to the cars heading west on Ipswich’s Centenary Highway. At any one moment a driver might laugh at such statements of gross consumerism; or be *indulged* to take the drive to Brookwater; or (if you’re like me) want to burn it down and scribble on the remains “Rudolf the Red,” like a character from Edward Abbey’s *The Monkey Wrench Gang*.

Landscapes matter. Landscapes are highly subjective: different people see different attributes in the landscape; the way I see the landscape in the Springfield area is very different to the way Mr. Lexus in the car in front of me sees it. Billboards, or advertisements, are one of many signposts in the landscape. ‘A lived-in landscape becomes a place,’ and spontaneous reactions to places are often an emotional response to the landscape.ⁱ If you found a problem in your landscape, wouldn’t the only *honest* way to write about it be from your own experiences of it? This essay is about a few journeys I took through space and time; I encourage others to journey into their backyard, because the things I found are much closer to the larger body of the thesis I am trying to write than I expected.

Sources also matter. Because the journey is only as good as the things that people tell me about it. At Denmark Hill I took a poem; after I visited Lewis Thomas’s old mansion at Blackstone I looked at the secondary source but found problems with it, so I went back to the *Queensland Times*; at Eden Station I used the *Queensland Times* too, along with some sketches by J.W. Laing, the 1909 survey map and the consultants reports done for the Springfield Land Corporation. This is a limited list and not extensive, but, as any traveller will say, “Pack light. You can always turn your undies inside-out.”

The Springfield area is in South-East Queensland, wedged between Ipswich and Brisbane, in what developers call the “western corridor.” Opossum Creek dominates the area, with Woogaroo Creek, the Greenbank Military Reserve, and Spring Mountain forming its boundaries. Once, field naturalists called it the Woogaroo-Goodna scrub, extending south for five kilometres from the Brisbane River.ⁱⁱ Now, it takes in the suburbs of Springfield, Springfield Central, Springfield Lakes and Brookwater. Owned by Springfield Land Corporation, it is Australia’s largest master planned city. The Springfield area forms part of greater Ipswich.

There are no poets writing about the Springfield area, but Thomas Shapcott, Ipswich’s most regarded living poet, offers a poem about a landscape. His first book *Time on Fire* was published in 1961 when he was just twenty-six. ‘Denmark Hill’ is the third poem in the collection, and it was also included in the epic collection of Queensland writing, *The Centenary Anthology* (1959).ⁱⁱⁱ I went to Denmark Hill because of a poem; places have a poetry—sometimes it is all we can see, or all we want to see, or all we should see, or all we can’t see.

Denmark Hill, the place, got its reputation from its rocks. Fossils of terrestrial vertebrates, molluscs, and insects have been found at Denmark Hill since 1890. The fossils are of Triassic age—between about 210 and 250 million years old. The coal is Triassic, too. Coalmines operated between 1912 and 1953 at Denmark Hill; these mines were small-scale operations, but they have left a maze of tunnels below the surface.

Denmark Hill is only a short walk from Ipswich city. There is an exhibit called “Triassic Park” with dinosaur pictures. I make my way past this along an asphalt path on the way to the water tower. I read the signs and look over the land. The sign I start at and the one I return to says this:

The ecological significance of this area is highly significant, being part of the last remaining unfragmented blocks of lowland eucalyptus forest in South East Queensland and containing significant patches of open forest, woodland, mountain heath and wetlands. These ecosystems support major significant populations of rare and threatened flora and fauna.

I chose this spot, as opposed to positions looking out over Amberley Air Base, or looking down to Gotham City in the far distance, because of what sprawls out below.

On the right is the University of Queensland’s Ipswich campus—it used to be a mental institution. On the left of the university is the showgrounds, and further left is Limestone Park. In the distance, behind the park, stand the stacks of Swanbank power station. Something is not right as I sit at the water tower reading the poem above the landscape. The ‘rise of blasted shale and pithead,’ ‘these disused quarries,’^{iv} move me from the water tower to find something else at Denmark Hill.

Past Triassic Park I follow the “waterfall track” that takes me past Quarry Pond and up onto a viewing platform. A cliff line surrounds the pond. It’s not the platform that interests me, it is the line marked on the wall of the cliff. A black metallic line of rock—coal—‘So much more the hill than age, that times / and stills to coal the first fertility.’^v

It is the ‘ancient talk of elements’ that we reap the benefits from when we mine ‘that great commodity coal;’^{vi} earthly processes that pack carbon into a gift that we can use to power and construct the world of today. Denmark Hill will continue to be around, beyond Shapcott’s childhood memories of it: ‘only time’s knife in the wind has known, / will know, worn Denmark Hill.’^{vii} He concludes, ‘So much more than this is Denmark Hill.’^{viii}

When Shapcott published this poem the mines at Denmark Hill had just shut down, with the scrub starting to take the hill back. Now, it is a conservation park, the quarry filled in with water has become a pond and waterfall; we exhaust the resources of an area and then reissue them as nature, ‘an ideal location for relaxation,’ as the Denmark Hill brochure suggests. If we open up ourselves to understanding a landscape—through poems or bird books or geological surveys—there is a paradox. It is easy to see the human hand marking almost everything; yet equally easy to see our own insignificance in the face of fossil rocks millions of years old. It is this challenge of history, the deep time and the past one hundred and fifty years (for us white people in Queensland) that often make it too hard.

I had a bit of time when I got back to my car. I got out the 1:100,000 topographic map of Ipswich and thought about going to Flinders Peak—there was a poem about that too. Instead, I head for a mark on the map that says ‘ruins.’ Brynhyfryd Park,^{ix} where I eat my lunch, is called a heritage place by the Ipswich City Council, there is a commemorative plaque there. It reads:

The beautiful mansion Brynhyfryd (the Castle) situated at the top of Blackstone Hill was the home of ‘Coal King’ Welshman Lewis Thomas and his wife Ann. Thomas was a major owner and developer of coal mines in this area who endowed both the United Welsh Church and the Blackstone–Ipswich Cambrian Choir, and he was founder and benefactor of the Eisteddfod movement in Queensland.

The plaque tells Brynhyfryd’s story: the opulence, the man (and his family), the coal, the philanthropy, the memory of a hero. Reflecting on the Brynhyfryd walk a few weeks later I started to dig into its history, beyond the secondary source, to get an idea of what it might have been like.

After getting married in 1859 in Wales Anne and Lewis Thomas spent eighteen years apart; her in Wales, him coal mining in Australia.^x Lewis started in the Victorian gold fields then moved north to Queensland and bought into the Blackstone seams.^{xi} His fortune was fully realized when he personally financed the “loop line” which linked his mine to the Bundamba main line.^{xii} It was a master move; the loop line took in the producing mines west of the main line (including Box Flat and Swanbank).

Anne Thomas was afraid of making the journey to Australia, but when she finally did, two hundred people received her into their Blackstone community. On this occasion Lewis’ employees gave her three books as a welcome gift: a family bible, Fleetwood’s life of Christ, and Bunyan’s Select works.^{xiii}

When Brynhyfryd was completed in 1890 there was a library to house those three books, along with many other valuable ‘works of old and modern authors and poets’.^{xiv} The library was on the fourth floor next to the tower room, and as its collection grew in size the children from Blackstone School would come and use the Thomas’ library.^{xv} Bunyan’s book must have had a special place. An easy line to let your eyes fall over from *The Pilgrim’s Progress*,^{xvi} if you were sitting in the top floor of the mansion, is the last piece of verse from part one:

What of my dross thou foundest there, be bold
To throw away, but yet preserve the Gold.
What if my gold be wrapped up in ore?
None throws away the apple for the core:
But if thou shalt cast all away as vain,
I know not but ‘twill make me dream again.^{xvii}

Brynhyfryd had over 30 rooms^{xviii} decorated with bronze and porcelain chandeliers, marble fireplaces and window canopies made of South African teak. The dining room sprawled, variously coloured in gold, pale green, blue, soft pink and yellow, the decorator achieved the impossible in ‘securing perfect harmony’.^{xix} To move between its four levels the occupants could use the hydraulic lift. If going up, they could then climb the

tower twenty two metres off the ground, if it was a clear day they would have seen Moreton Bay, or looking in the opposite direction ‘a silent panorama of Australian bush.’^{xx}

If someone did read those lines of Bunyan’s they had many luxurious places to ponder them. But would they have missed that short sentence: ‘None throws away the apple for the core’? They threw it away at Brynhyfryd. By 1930 the castle was unattended. Anne outlived her husband and daughter^{xxi} and by the time of her death in 1930, there was no one to assume the mansion. The depression was tough: it had to be sold. The coal was worth more than the mansion, but Lewis had left one final surprise. When digging exploratory tunnels miners found workings older than the mansion itself! A young Lewis had worked the best of the hill before erecting his mansion.^{xxii} By 1937, there had been five explosions, probably from coal gas, the last one destroyed Brynhyfryd.^{xxiii}

All that remains is a wall about six feet high, covered in graffiti, with high barbed fences protecting the dangerous area. It is the home of yellow orb spiders now. Between the fence and the trees they hang over the thin track, their yellow anchors holding them in the wind, and after a night of hard work insects are wrapped in their web.

If Brynhyfryd was still around, would Shapcott’s *Time on Fire* be in the library? Standing on Blackstone Hill, could anyone have imagined a setting like this when Brynhyfryd was in its prime? This brings me back to the last line of the Bunyan quote: ‘I know not but ‘twill make me dream again.’ And so it goes, Ipswich—including Denmark Hill, Blackstone, and the Woogaroo-Goodna scrub—dreams again, the landscape changes under a new demand, under a new banner of progress.

I walk back down Blackstone Hill, holding a stick in front of my face so the yellow orbs don’t get me, looking as funny as a person exercising with hand weights. I get back to my old Toyota Camry with a slow leaking back tyre, and finish the drive back to Springfield Lakes.

It’s back to the problem that started the essay that I return. The problem that took me to Ipswich and back, the problem that cost me four weeks of thesis research, the problem that cost me a tank of petrol. ‘Be Indulgent. Have Everything,’ it advertised Brookwater, the newest suburb in the Springfield subdivision. Who were the previous owners in the Springfield area? How has the Springfield landscape been used?

James Josey was not the first landholder in the Springfield area; the bora rings at Camira tell us that. But he was the first to clear large tracts of land and build a house. He named his home Eden Station, after the ship he came to Australia on as a convict. Josey owned 7,000 acres in the district by the 1870’s.

Josey initially worked cattle, sheep and timber at the station. The timber along Opossum Creek was good, with Hoop Pine, Red Cedar, Black Bean and Bumpy Ash.^{xxiv} Later Josey dabbled in sugar and cotton. In the early years after separation sugar was widespread in the Redbank area. It was being planted everywhere in the colony to see how it would grow. The clay stone soil at Eden would not have drained well enough for sugar, it likes a lot of water but doesn’t like wet feet—this leads to foot rot. In 1876, although the colony was in the midst of a drought caused by a major El Nino event, a reporter for the *Queensland Times* noted how the horses and cattle ‘show no signs of suffering from want of grass or water.’^{xxv}

Eden station was, and still is, in an opportune spot, nineteen kilometres to Ipswich and twenty-five kilometres to Brisbane. It had a two-story sandstone house with twenty-six rooms and a veranda around the whole house. In the vicinity of the house Josey, ‘added largely to nature ... with the best selections of the various trees and shrubs which make up a well arranged garden and orchard.’^{xxvi} These included orange trees, grape vines and fig trees—it is the fig trees that remain today.

In 1903 Josey died, the house passed to his trustee Thomas Cribb. Saw miller C.A. Kruger & Sons bought the land from Moreton Shire Council in 1937. After milling all the good timber, Kruger sold it in 1953, and by 1956 Associated Forest Holding Pty Ltd owned it.^{xxvii} The timber of the Springfield area was important, but so too was the coal; in recent years as the land came under sale many companies have prospected the area.^{xxviii}

In 1951 the Army required a large area in the vicinity of Brisbane for training its soldiers. This with another large parcel bought in the 1960’s now constitutes the Greenbank Army Reserve.^{xxix} It’s a nice piece of land; I drive past it nearly every day from my place at North Maclean. One soldier wrote this poem in the 1950’s:

The place is full of stately trees

That whisper in the evening breeze
And fills our tent with heaps of leaves
A lovely place is Greenbank!^{xxx}

With all this resource exploitation there was one other option that could have played out in the 1990's when Springfield Land Corporation bought the land: Nature Reserve. If you combine it with the Greenbank Army Reserve it would have been a huge area of lowland eucalypt forest. But it didn't happen: governments and councils were too slow, the urban sprawl continues its march, and the wild horses of the scrub are now locked in the Greenbank Army Reserve by high barbed fences put up in the last decade. At Springfield, like Denmark Hill, nature will be 'enhanced' and designed as an 'experience.'^{xxxi}

Returning to Eden, I was excited, the same way you get excited when you come home from studying in a different state and you hug your mum. I went to Denmark Hill to read a poem and found a seam of coal, a pond and a paradox in our history making. I went to Blackstone Hill to see what was left, I found a mansion that once had everything yet it still got consumed by the commodity that created it. And, back at Eden, I find two old fig trees, the lantana so thick I can only make out small patch of sandstone from the foundations of the old homestead. In the distance I see the Augusta Parkway with billboards advertising 'new Mirvac homes.' Standing here back at Eden I am about a kilometre away from the sign that started this whole thing. 'Be Indulgent. Have Everything,' it said.

This essay was a deviation from the thesis I am supposed to be writing. But in writing the essay I found many of the commodities I am trying to grasp for the thesis—coal, timber, and sugar. If we dig around in our backyard, who knows where a little wondering and serendipity will take us?^{xxxii} I indulged myself in history, landscapes and ruins, and found that, yes, we can have everything: but at what cost? At Eden I looked at my legs covered in rash from the lantana, my arm cut with dried blood from a barbed-wire fence I wasn't supposed to jump, and I had a smile on my face. Edward Abbey also said this:

You can't see *anything* from a car; you've got to get out of the goddamned contraption and walk, better yet crawl, on hands and knees, over the sandstone and through the thornbush and cactus. When traces of blood begin to mark your trail you'll see something, maybe. Probably not. In the second place most of what I write about in this book is already gone or going under fast. This is not a travel guide but an elegy.^{xxxiii}

The theory I carry with me is what I said above: *landscapes matter*. Seeing in this way makes a seam of coal, a wall with graffiti on it, and two fig trees, important places to stop in the landscape. These ruins are not a matter of beauty, they are 'an echo of the remote past suddenly become present and actual.'^{xxxiv}

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- ^{ix} Pronounced Brin-huv-rid, and meaning pleasant hill.
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- ^{xiii} "Mrs. Lewis Thomas Death at 93"; Nerida A. Parry, *The Brynhyfryd Story* (N.p: n.p., 1979), 23. Parry says that Bunyan's select works were among the gifts; this is most likely because of the wide popularity of Bunyan's books and also the Thomas's continual support of the United Welsh Church at Blackstone.
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